

## Good Works or Faith Works?

Romans 9:8

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Why are so many of us human beings still skeptical that God cares for us? Why are so many of us even here who are church-goers skeptical about the promises that he has made in his book? And of course the answer is obvious to all of us because many of us have found that these promises were not fulfilled in our lives. And that's why we're skeptical about all the talk of God's love and his care and God's interest in us. We just found that many of the promises made in this book have not been fulfilled in our lives. Loved ones, I could point to one that I think causes a lot of us to stumble – it's James 5:15. It's a promise that you'll recognize immediately as I read it. "And the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven". So you remember verse 14: "Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; (v. 15) and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up."

I think there are many of us probably here who would say, "We've tried that and sometimes it just hasn't worked." And we would say, "Well, on the whole, God cares about the whole creation and he holds it in the right orbit in the universe, but these detailed promises he doesn't seem to always keep." Of course, the question I'd put to you is a hard one -- it is, "Could it be that the fault is not with God? Could it be that it's not that he has failed to keep his promises but that you are not one of those to whom he made the promise?" Now a lot of us have a tendency to say, "Oh, but he made them to everybody." But he didn't. He only gave those promises to his children. Many of us have a tendency to say with our old general philosophy, "Oh, but we are his children." But loved ones, there are over four billion of us in the world today and all those four billion are not God's children. They are God's creatures, because God created them.

So all men and women and all boys and girls everywhere are God's creatures because he created them but that doesn't make them his children. His children are those that are mentioned in John 1:12-13. You might look at it just to clarify it in your own mind. John 1:12 describes who God's children are: "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." So God's children are only those of us who have received his Holy Spirit into our lives and as the saying goes, "have been born again". We're not all his children; we're all his creatures.

Now you remember that over the past few weeks we've shared that many of us who are creatures tend to regard ourselves as his children for the wrong reasons. We tend to think of ourselves as his children and therefore, people who have the privilege of those promises of his being made real in their lives for the wrong reasons. Many of us, for instance, are caught up with the "herd instinct" approach. You remember we justify ourselves through group identification. We move with the Kiwanis Club. We move with the Lion's Club. We move with the Shriners and that makes us part of them and we feel a sense of self-justification through our identification with the group and we become part of the group just by moving with them.

Many of us think of ourselves as God's children on the same basis. We think, "I don't know if God knows me personally, but I know he knows most of the people here in this church and I move with the people in this church; I move with the people that God knows. Certainly I'm a child of God because I

move in those circles. And if God knows Billy Graham, certainly I support Billy Graham and I move in that kind of environment and God must accept me along with the rest.”

And what we've discovered is that there are no spiritual “groupies”. There's no such thing as a Christian “groupie”. Right years ago in Israel God settled once and for all that you're not saved as a group. You're saved individually. “You have to deal with Me [God] by personal encounter, you and I together.” In other words, there are no “friends of friends” in heaven. Last Sunday, you remember we shared that some of us, think of ourselves as children of God because we don't simply attend the same meetings that other Christians attend, and we believe the same thing that other Christians believe. That's what we'll say. But look -- it says in that verse that you have to believe.

Now I believe that Jesus was God's Son. I believe that he is the Savior of the world. I believe that he will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the catholic church. I believe in the communion of saints. I believe in all those things. Now doesn't that mean I'm a child of God? And you remember we shared that many of us say we believe when we mean we believe in the same way as we believe in differentiating in calculus. It's something that we'll never be called upon to prove too much, so we accept the idea of it. We believe in the law of gravity. We accept the idea of the law of gravity. We wouldn't die for it but we accept the idea of it. And many of us have that kind of attitude to believing in Jesus when we mean I give mental acquiescence or assent to these ideas. But you remember that what we shared was that the Gospel is not believing in that purely mental intellectual sense. The Greek word for believing is “pisteuo” and it falls over into “obedience” in Greek, it topples over into obedience. And in fact, in Jesus' terminology, belief is synonymous with obedience.

Now there is a verse that a brother shared with me last Sunday that points that out. It's John 3:36, “He who believes in the Son has eternal life; he who does not obey the son shall not see life.” Here you can see by the juxtaposition of the two clauses -- one is parallel to the other. “He who believes in the Son has eternal life; he who does not believe?” No, it is “he who does not obey.” He who does not obey the Son shall not see life. So when you talk about believing in Jesus you mean believing and obeying him. In other words you can believe till the cows come home that Jesus' death will take away the sin from your life, but unless you actually submit yourself to that death with Jesus you will continue to live with sin in your life until you die.

In actual fact, what happened on Calvary was that when Jesus died we died with him. All our old perverted personality was destroyed. So we are told then in Romans 6:11, “Consider yourselves dead to sin.” The Greek word is “logizomai”, consider – it is to treat yourself as really dead. What we shared last Sunday was that there is no point in standing outside the operating theatre and saying there is the operation, Jesus' death, that will take away the things from my life that spoil it: the anger, the envy, the jealousy. I believe that that will happen if I ever put myself on that operating table. But I am just at the moment going to stand outside the door and believe. If I believe hard enough, somehow the operation will take place without me ever getting onto the table. Well that is not so. The operation will never take place until you submit yourself to that death with Jesus -- to self-rights. Then the Holy Spirit comes in and takes away the things that spoil your life, and creates a new person in you. So, what we shared last Sunday was that belief is not a mental or emotional acquiescence to certain ideas. It is a volitional commitment of your whole being to the actual experience of Jesus' death.

Some of us today would say, “Well, I agree, I agree. I don't only attend the meetings Christians attend, I not only believe and do what other Christians believe and do, but I also believe in John

3:36, which you read, 'he who does not believe ... he who does not obey'. I believe that. I believe that belief is the same as obedience. I believe that faith without works is dead. I believe that illustration that Jesus used of the man who built his house on the sand and the man who built his house on rock and heard Jesus' words and did them. I believe that. I believe that being a Christian means you change your behavior and your life -- and that is what I do.

I do the things that Christians do: I read the Bible almost every day and pray frequently. I set a good example to my children at home. I live a clean life. I try to set before them an example of honesty and an example of kindness. I not only give at my office, but also to the church. I give to evangelical associations, and missions. I run my life as Christians are supposed to run their lives. In fact, if you wanted my life described you could see it in 1 Peter 1:5-7, 'For this very reason make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love.'

I think many of us think this way and I can understand how easy it is to do it. We feel we do the things mentioned. We try to exercise self-control, we act as good examples, we are faithful to our wives or husbands, and we are kindly to our associates. Therefore we believe we are a child of God. Yet many of us who say these things would admit that God's promises do not seem to be completely fulfilled in our lives. In other words there are many of us who would say we do not only move in Christian circles, we do not only believe the things Christians think -- but we also do the things Christians do. Yet, we have to admit that there was a slight disappointment, a slight sense of anticlimax about some of these promises in the Bible. We feel that maybe God just is not working the same way today as he used to work. But, in some way, I'm certainly a child of God. I have no question about that because I believe and move in these circles and I do the things Christians do -- but I do admit that somehow there is a slight disappointment in my life as far as God is concerned -- and I do not quite know why it is.

Now, the verse we are studying today gives the answer to that uncertainty. The verse is Romans 9:8, "This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are reckoned as descendants." So you see the two clauses. You remember God made his promises to Abraham, but Abraham had two sets of descendants. One set, you remember, came through Hagar his wife's maid. You remember how that came about. God promised Abraham, "You will have children as the sand upon the seashore." But Sarah, his wife, was in her eighties, and Abraham was in his nineties, and they thought it would never happen -- so they decided to try and help God fulfil his promise. So Sarah said to him, "Go into my maid, Hagar, and go to bed with her and have a child, and that will be the child God will use to bring about his promise." Abraham did that, and the son that was born to Hagar was called Ishmael. However, God refused to extend his promises to Ishmael, because Ishmael was a child of the flesh. He was a child produced by human effort, in order to fulfil God's promise. Three years later, when Abraham was actually 100 and Sarah was 90, they had a child miraculously and the child's name was called Isaac, and that was God's supernatural gift to them. God fulfilled the promise Himself, by his own power and not by a man's faith in his own abilities.

Now that is the difference between the children of the flesh and the children of the promise. The child of flesh says, "I can do what God wants me to do with a little help. If he helps me a little I can live the kind of life that he wants me to live." The child of promise says, "No way can I do it. There is no way I can live this life that has been described to me. If it is going to be lived, God himself has to do it through me." That is the difference between the child of flesh and the

child of promise. Do you see the secret? The secret is that you can only be born of God, the new birth can only occur in your life, if you absolutely leave it. If you do not see this as absolutely necessary, then the new birth will not occur. It is the same with a car. You will only get rid of a car when you see that with all of your tinkering you can no longer make it capable of what it used to be. You will dump the lawn mower when at last you see that with all the patching that you do, you will never restore it to what it was once able to do. In other words, you get rid of the old and get a new one only when you see that with all your tinkering, with all your patching, you can't make the old what it used to be.

That is the way it is with us also. It is only when you come to the place where you say, "I am absolutely incapable of being what God wants me to be." It is only when you admit that you are absolutely incapable of doing what God wants you to do. It is only then that you will be willing to get rid of things. Until that time you will always believe that you can do it. You will believe, "Yes, I believe in Jesus, certainly, certainly I believe in Jesus' death. I believe that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and I believe that the wages of sin is death and I believe that God commended his love towards us and that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us, and I believe that Jesus paid for that sin on the cross. I believe that that was God's arrangement. I accept that, and now it is up to me to show my gratitude to God by living a life that is changed and absolutely different. Yes, I believe that Jesus died for me. I think it is strange that God sets up this arrangement. The only cure for sin is death and then Jesus dies that death. But if God wants to carry on that kind of play act, I will join in with it, and if he says, 'the wages of sin is death,' then Jesus, his Son, pays those wages and I am just to believe that -- and I do. Now, I will set about being the kind of person he wants me to be."

That is the way we interpret the death of Jesus. The truth is absolutely different from that. What God means when he says "the wages of sin" is that death is due. That is the only thing that will wipe out sin. Death is the only answer.

Unless you experience death, sin cannot be wiped out of your life. We could never have abided the God-forsakenness that Jesus himself had experienced when he cried, "My God, My God. Why hast thou forsaken me?" He actually went through hell for us. We could never have experienced or abided that. But it is because of that that we are now called upon to experience that death by faith. The meaning of Jesus dying on the cross for us is that by our taking part of Jesus' death to self in our own lives, we can have sin wiped out of our lives. In other words, only when we come to the point where we say, "I am a miserable, selfish, dirty, unclean monstrosity that is incapable of doing anything but making use of other people and using my money or my advantages for my own benefit. I am nothing but absolute garbage and refuse compared with Jesus."

Only when we say that and we say, "The only thing that can be done with me is for me to be destroyed utterly and for something new to be recreated in my place" -- only when we say that are we beginning to take part in the death with Jesus. When we come to the place where we see we cannot possibly fulfil God's promise in us by our own efforts, only then when we cleave to Jesus in desperation and say, "Lord, you have destroyed the envy and the pride and the anger and the rottenness that is in me -- if you have destroyed all this in a cosmic miracle on Calvary -- then Lord, I cleave to you. I sink into you. I cling to you." Then as you cling to him in hopeless, desperate faith, a miracle takes place. The Holy Spirit comes down into your life and makes the death of Jesus completely real in you and creates a new person inside you -- and you rise up -- and you find that this new person is able to live like Christ because it is Christ inside you.

Now, this can only happen when in desperate, hopeless faith you cleave to Jesus and see that the only thing to be done with your miserable old self is for it to be destroyed -- and then you become a child of promise -- then there flows from your life, day by day, fruit born automatically from the Holy Spirit who has come into you. As you stand transfixed in love for your Savior Jesus your life begins to bear fruit and you find all kinds of faith works coming out. They are works that stem from your absolute faith in God's ability to do what you have no faith in yourself to do. "Faith works" stem from your absolute distrust of yourself and your complete faith in God. "Good works" stem from your faith in yourself and your distrust of God.

That is why the psychology of today is so lopsided. I should not say that as Elaine and Ross [members of the church] keep telling me I should not knock all psychologists -- but there is a great thrust in the schools of psychology to say that, "You are good, you are good. You are really born good and all you have to do is try harder and you will be better." That is so cruel! It is meant to be kindness but it is so cruel. All the books like, "I'm OK, You're OK", are so cruel and unkind because the fact is that you are NOT good. It is true what this dear book [the Bible] says: that we are sinners and we are miserable self-centered creatures. We cannot be changed unless God changes us in his Son.

When you accept this, when you see yourself as you really are, and you accept God's estimate of you, then it is possible to become a child of promise. What is God's estimate of us? It is found in Romans 8:7, "The mind of the flesh is enmity against God; it is not subject to God's law, neither indeed can it be." Paul said in Romans 7:18, "There is no good thing in me." That is God's estimate of us. When we accept that and see that the only thing then is for that to be destroyed and to start and obey again, then a new birth becomes possible and you become a child of promise. It is a supernaturally empowered way to live; so much so that the other, old way cannot even be called life. That is why Jesus all the time says, "I have come to bring you life."

But first each one of you, including myself, have to accept God's estimate of us; that there is no good thing in us and that all that we ought to receive is death. When you accept that and you begin to ask the Holy Spirit to show you how to experience that death in Jesus, a miracle takes place. Out of a miserable, crawling, old caterpillar with so many feet it cannot control them all, there comes a butterfly -- something that will soar -- something that will fly high. That is what the new birth is.

Are you a child of promise -- or are you a child of the flesh? Are you still trying to be like God as Eve was by the power of your own strength -- or have you given up the hope of that and are you trusting God to make his miracle real in you? I pray that you will see which one -- and that you will make a move today.

Let's pray.

Dear Father, we have tried for so long to live by the Golden Rule, and so often we felt like we were not doing too badly until we'd see the absolute Jeckyl and Hyde character that we had when we were off-guard. There would be all kinds of evil to stir up within us -- things that we could not believe, things in our dream life that we could not believe were part of us. And Lord, we have known in those moments that something deeper needed to be done. And Lord, we believe that that has been done in Jesus on the cross. We believe that that was a cosmic miracle that took place in eternity with just a physical expression on Calvary. So Lord God, we would commit ourselves to the cure -- the only cure for sin and independence, that death with Jesus. We ask your Holy Spirit to show each

one of us here in what way we need to be willing to experience death and to cling close to Jesus and cleave to him with all our powers until we are lost in him and there rises up within us a new person, a new creation, created by the power of the Holy Spirit through your promise. We give ourselves to you for this purpose. In Jesus' name, Amen.